

## *The Beginning: Potential*

Humanities Tennessee (at the time called the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, later renamed Tennessee Humanities Council, and then, in 2000, Humanities Tennessee) was founded in 1973. By 1977 it was flush with federal dollars through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), but its books and records were in complete disarray, the grants program (the only program) was rife with conflicts of interest and suffered from lack of oversight, the board didn't trust its leadership, and the staff of four was inexperienced. Robert Cheatham, newly hired, was one of the four. The other three left in quick order, but Robert, quickly realizing the enormous potential for the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, stayed on. He knew he wanted to dedicate his life to realizing that potential. He was named Executive Director in 1978, a mere eight months after he was hired.



### *Building the Foundation*

With Robert as the new Executive Director, the organization soon emerged with new grant guidelines, auditable books, stable staff leadership, effective board-staff communications, and meticulous record-keeping. The grant review process became more systematic and transparent, focused on economy, effectiveness, and quality.

The newly-named Tennessee Humanities Council was solely a grant-making body, but even in that limited role it began to have a marked impact on the humanities in Tennessee. THC funded Chattanooga's first Conference on Southern Literature, which has continued biennially since. THC funded "A Divine Tour of Ancient Egypt" at Memphis State University, which led to the Wonders Series and the building of the Pyramid in Memphis. THC began funding a series of innovative projects of the East Tennessee Historical Society, involving small historical

organizations in scholar-directed research, work that continues today with community historical organizations.

In the early years of Robert's tenure, the quality of the Board emerged as another important foundation. Board membership became more broadly representative of the State. When Robert invited Governor Lamar Alexander to a Board meeting during the planning for Homecoming '86, the Governor was so impressed with the quality of the elected members of the Board that he made sure future gubernatorial appointees to the Board were similarly impressive.

In 1984, THC was recognized by NEH as one of the most outstanding humanities councils in the nation.

### *Courage and Innovation*

In the fall of 1984, Robert wrote an article for the Federation of State Humanities Council's journal that criticized the manner in which NEH reviewed Councils (even though the same review had, only months before, resulted in THC being recognized by NEH as outstanding). The article created consternation within NEH, but contributed to a greater understanding throughout the humanities community of the review process.



Early in his tenure, Robert recognized that the organization was unable to track its contacts and relationships, and he envisioned a computerized database that would show every individual relationship with THC. He became involved in the Federation's National Information management Project (NIMP), for which THC agreed to become a test site. Robert programmed the software himself and in 1987 produced the first version of a multi-user relational database management system that, with revisions, additions, and upgrades, Humanities Tennessee still uses. Over the years, he installed the system at the offices of almost a quarter of the Councils. The system was enormously valuable to Humanities Tennessee, making possible an incalculable increase in productivity that has improved fundraising and the success of the Southern Festival of Books.

### *Leadership and Legacy*

Around the time of Governor Lamar Alexander's reelection in 1982, Robert recognized the opportunity presented by the Governor's planned Homecoming '86 program. Working with Alexander's staff, Robert made sure THC was involved from the start in all the serious educational efforts, and he personally planned most of them. This Tennessee Community Heritage Project consisted of six scholars-in-residence, housed in universities across the state, assisting community groups in all 95 counties in studying their history, six copies of a 30-panel traveling exhibition that toured over 100 sites, a Homecoming Literary Festival, and a special edition of *Touchstone* inserted into Sunday papers in the State's six largest cities. The Project received an Award of Merit, their highest award, from the American Association for State and Local History.

After the success of the Homecoming Literary Festival, John Egerton and Michael Zibart, who had recently attended the 1986 Miami Book Fair, suggested to Robert that THC put on a similar event. By then, Robert had begun to recognize that THC's



future growth depended on raising non-federal dollars, and the book fair seemed to be a good vehicle. Under Robert's leadership and supported by his dedication to the quality and viability of the event, the Southern Festival of Books launched in 1989. The Festival was innovative in combining commerce and education (previously, "book fairs" were commercial and "literary festivals" were educational). Moreover, the Festival expanded "educational" beyond the confines of "literary" to include all genres, especially those that had traditionally been the province of the humanities, such as history.

In the late 1980s, Robert took the lead in developing the Southern Humanities Media Fund, a funding collaborative of various humanities councils from the Southern states. He was the Media Fund's founding President. Until about 2008, when shrinking federal support forced most Council-members to withdraw, the Media Fund supported a significant and widely-praised body of work, all on Southern culture and history.

Humanities Tennessee inherited the Young Writers' Workshop from another agency and transformed the workshop from a week of play for the well-heeled into a serious program for talented young people of all backgrounds.

### *A Leader of National Importance*

Less than a month after the first Southern Festival of Books, Robert was elected to the Board of the Federation. Before, during, and after his service on the Board, he exerted tremendous influence on the Federation's advocacy efforts, its relationship with NEH, its views on data collection, and even on governance practices. As chair, he led the Federation through the period of greatest upheaval the State Councils have ever known. In the end, the Federation, led by Robert, had brokered on behalf of Councils an unprecedented promise from NEH that funding for the Councils would never be less than a third of the NEH program funds. Along the way, Robert crafted a set of principles for reauthorization that have remained a model of elegance, reason, and consensus-building.



Robert initiated the MOMS tours. He played an important role in the development of the partnership between the Federation and the Smithsonian that led to MOMS nationally. He also initiated the Community History Development Fund, which is a maturation of programs begun during the Heritage Project.

*Chapter 16* and *Salon@615*, both outgrowths of the Festival, were Robert's ideas. These together have made Humanities Tennessee the foremost literary arts organization in the State, as well as the principal book reviewer in the State.

With wisdom, creativity, and exemplary leadership, Robert Cheatham has served the people of Tennessee for nearly four decades, and his work has laid a strong and stable foundation for Humanities Tennessee to provide effective and accessible public programming across the state.

